CRC Mitzvah Farm: Growing Relationship with the Whole of Creation
Eden Seminary Spring Convocation 2023 – Panel Presentation
Karen M. Flotte

Thank you for inviting me to be part of this holy gathering. Despite our small size, Central Reform Congregation's Mitzvah Farm is one of the largest gardens for food security in the City of St. Louis. Our food justice partner, Trinity Food Ministry, located 5 blocks from the Farm, provides groceries for over 10,000 guests annually. The Mitzvah Farm is the single largest source of fresh organic vegetables for their guests.

Today I will talk about how the CRC Mitzvah Farm began and where the journey has taken us. The story begins about 3,000 years ago. My Jewish ancestors lived in intimate relationship with all of creation. Through this relationship they came to know and enter into a covenant with YHWH. Jewish traditions, texts, holidays, spiritual practices and mitzvot or commandments, all spring forth these from earth-based, living roots. And this, my Christian cousins, are the deepest roots of your tradition as well.

The mitzvot can be seen as answering the question, how do we live in right, ethical relationship with all of creation – interpreted through time and place in different ways. CRC's Mitzvah Farm is one way we answer that question in our neighborhood, in the heart of the City, at the edge of the Delmar Divide. Our beginnings were incredibly humble. As one of the early leaders described it -- "I worked on the Farm when it was 2 raised beds filled with Bermuda grass and no water access nearby. We had to drag hoses from the building across the parking lot. It is nothing short of a miracle that the Mitzvah Farm has grown to this size."

As Pete Seeger sang, "Inch by inch and row by row, gonna make this garden grow" our Farm grew slowly, intentionally, through a process of trial and error, adding infrastructure and systems along the way. Building relationships within our congregation and leadership and with our food justice partner was key to our on-going development. Building relationship is essential. Seven years ago, we moved from a community garden model to a food justice model donating to Trinity Food Ministry. Our first year we proudly donated 50 pounds of produce. The next year, we started weekly communal gardening and planted two seasons – summer and fall – increasing our harvest to 500 pounds. The following year, we planted three seasons – spring through fall, began teaching at services, communicating with our congregation, and offering religious education and music events at the garden. We increased congregational engagement over 140% -- over 150

members annually until the pandemic. We also met regularly with Rev. Barbi Click at Trinity Food Ministry to work more effectively with their needs and find out what their guests want to eat, changing our strategies and planting plans along the way. 97% of Trinity's guests are African American so we switched to vegetables which are part of their traditional foodways. And requested by the guests. Collard and mustard greens, turnips and okra, hot peppers and green beans. Important in so many ways. As one guest told Barbi as she held a bag of our collard greens, "Do you know how expensive this is even at Aldi's. I can't afford it! Now I can cook my mama's greens for my children." We donated over 1,000 pounds of produce that year.

Today, with a 32 x 32 foot garden, 6 raised beds, 14 fruit trees, a core team of 10 regular volunteers, a budget around $1,500, we produce over 1,500 pounds of food annually. Our orchard fruit is usually gleaned by neighbors. Simple, small, sustainable, local equals transformative impacts.

When we began this journey, we knew that growing food for our neighbors was the right thing to do. We didn't imagine the impact on our lives, our congregation, and the land we live in relationship with. It has been simply transformative.

Our congregation lives in deeper relationship with our land. Once barely thought of, "the land beyond the parking lot" is now a place where we live out some of our deepest held Jewish practices and values, where we learn from and celebrate the Torah of the Earth and practice tikkun olam, repair of the world. The Torah of the Earth teaches us this truth. The health and wholeness of the entire eco-system depends on the health and wholeness of each member of the eco-system.

The orchard and farm have significant positive environmental impacts in this time of climate crisis including:

- turf reduction
- habitat restoration for pollinators, birds and animals, increasing biodiversity in the City
- air quality improvement and stormwater management– our orchard trees alone remove 1,600 pounds of CO2 and intercept 12,000 gallons of rainwater per year. The garden has similar impacts but I don't have exact figures.

Our Farm provides a hands on, experiential learning space for all ages – pre-schoolers to elders – to learn about, reflect on and practice tikkun olam, especially economic, environmental and racial justice. Wonder grows as seeds sprout. While teaching at the Farm, I have witnessed minds fully engaged with awe, perceptions radically changed, hearts expanded beyond the horizon, and souls rocked to their depths.

As vegetables flourish so do relationships within our congregation. Our Sundays at the Garden build joyful community across ages. Our Farm Team is intentional about being the place of welcome and shalom. Folks new to CRC or seeking deeper connections or those feeling a bit marginalized will often volunteer creating new points of connection and engagement within the community. Peer ministry and support happens co-naturally with gardening. Those who are struggling with major life events or who are in their year of mourning come to the garden finding solace and healing through companionship and shared work.

We have dug deep into the earth-based roots of our tradition and have integrated spaces for Jewish spiritual practice and celebration which include a Jericho style meditation labyrinth, fire pit for the celebration of Lag B'Omer and two learning/worship spaces. All completed before the pandemic, we couldn't have predicted what a gift it would be to ourselves and our neighbors who gathered in our greenspace. Our first in-person services and High Holidays were held by the garden in what I called our Jewish Revival Tent

The Torah of the Farm invites new understanding of the ancient living roots of our tradition. Most Jewish holidays sprung forth from agricultural and natural cycles. St. Louis' growing season mirrors Israel's closely, we literally see and understand anew these roots. Passover, festival of liberation, was and is the time of planting. Shavuot, festival of responsibility and receiving Torah at Mt. Sinai, was and is the first harvest. Sukkot, the harvest festival of joy and fulfillment was and is our final harvest. Current gold standard orchard and regenerative agricultural practice are literally outlined in the Torah. For example, Shmita or the Sabbatical year, leaving the land fallow every 7 years, is still observed in Israel. Last year was the Shmita year and we observed it at the Farm using cover crops to heal our soil. The results are simply miraculous.

From its humble roots, two raised beds filled with Bermuda Grass, the Mitzvah Farm has grown to be the heart of our congregation, a place of Shalom and celebration, a place where we plant hope and harvest love.

I'd like to close with a kavanah or intention I wrote for the blessing of challah or bread and wine

Grain and salt of the earth
Ancient Living Water
Bee's sweet labor in meadow's fragile beauty
Olive oil, flowing fruit of the trees
Bird's sweet offering of eggs
Yeast's holy breath
Fire's alchemy and
Divine-human creative partnership
Bring forth sweet sustenance,
Kneading together the whole of Creation
In the humble loaf we hold in our hands.
Blessed along with the fruit of the vine,
we remember
we are part of the whole.
We are sustained by and sustain the entire web of Creation. Amen.